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ABSTRACT

Private speech is speech overtly directed to a young child's self and not directly spoken to another listener. Private speech develops differently during fantasy play than constructive play. This study examined age differences in the amount of fantasy play in the preschool classroom and in the amount and type of private speech that occurs during fantasy play in free play episodes. Forty preschool students were observed in their classroom during free play activities. Children completed either the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence--Revised or the Communication Domain of the Battelle Developmental Inventory; their parents completed the Hollingshead Index for Socioeconomic Status. Results showed that age differences were found in the amount of fantasy play and in the amount of total private speech, word play and repetition, and fantasy play private speech utterances during free play activities in the preschool classroom. (JPB)

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Fantasy Play in Preschool Classrooms: Age Differences in Private Speech

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Abstract

Private speech is speech which is overtly directed to a young child's self and is not directly spoken to another listener. Further, private speech develops differently in fantasy play than other types of play activities such as constructive or functional play. While children engage in fantasy play, they learn to make decisions from among various courses of action. The purposes of this investigation were to examine age differences (1) in the amount of fantasy play in the preschool classroom and (2) in the amount and type of private speech that occurs during fantasy play during free play episodes in the preschool classroom. Forty preschoolers were observed in their preschool classroom four times on different days in ten minute segments during free play activities. The results showed that there were age differences in the amount of fantasy play that occurred in the preschool classroom. Age differences were found in the amount of total private speech, word play and repetition, and fantasy play utterances during free play activities in the preschool classroom.

Private speech is speech which is overtly directed to a young child's self and not directly spoken to another individual or listener. According to Vygotsky (1934/1986), the development of private speech represents the young child's efforts to use language processes to guide his or her own behavior and is therefore a significant tool of cognitive development. The child uses language not only for social communication, but also as a way of monitoring and instructing his or her behavior. Private speech can be viewed as a transitional period between external, social communication and internal, self-directed communication. It is gradually internalized as the child grows older and gains higher levels of task mastery.

During different aspects of preschoolers' free play, private speech is a normal part of the play experience (Rubin, 1979; Rubin & Dyck, 1980). Private speech develops differently in fantasy play than other types of play activities. While children engage in fantasy play, they learn to make decisions from among various courses of action. Further, fantasy play utterances may allow children to practice communicating and interacting with others (Berk, 1992).

The purposes of this investigation were to examine age differences (1) in the amount of fantasy play in the preschool classroom and (2) in the amount and type of private speech that occurs during fantasy play during free play episodes in the preschool classroom.

Method

Sample

Participants were forty children attending a Midwestern preschool program: 10 two-year-olds, 10 three-year-olds, 9 four-year-olds, and 11 five-year-olds. The preschoolers who were three and older were given the vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence – Revised (WPPSI-R) to determine their verbal ability (Wechsler, 1989). The two-year-olds were given the Communication Domain of the Battelle Developmental

Inventory (BDI) (Newborg, Stock, & Wnek, 1988). The children's parents completed the Hollingshead Index for Socioeconomic Status.

Procedure

The preschoolers were observed in the natural environment of their preschool classroom during free choice activities. Each preschooler was observed four times in ten-minute segments over the course of the investigation, with each observation occurring on a separate day. There were two observation intervals per minute, each consisting of a ten second observation interval followed by a twenty second recording interval. In all, there were 80 intervals of coding for each preschooler.

Observational Categories

Fantasy play

Play that assumed a certain role of pretending with objects.

EXAMPLE:

Michael played in the dramatic play area of the classroom. The area was set up as a kitchen. Michael pretended to be cooking the dinner for his family. He was using the stove and pots to make spaghetti and the dolls at the table to be his children. While the spaghetti was cooking, Michael was setting the table so the family would have some cups, forks, dishes, and napkins when dinner was served.

Private Speech

Private speech was coded using Berk and Garvin's (1984) private speech categories. These categories were:

1. Affect Expression: Remarks or expressions of feelings and emotions which were not directed to any particular listener whether adult or peer. These expressions or feelings

had no external cause but were attempts by the child to integrate an event, thought, or feeling.

EXAMPLE:

Bobby was given a new book by his teacher and said to no one in particular, "Wow! Great!"

2. Word play and repetition: Words and sounds repeated by the child in a playful, rhythmic matter for their own sake.

EXAMPLE:

Elizabeth went around the classroom repeating "Put the cup in the sink; put the cup in the trash; put the cup on the table."

3. Fantasy Play: Sound-effect verbalizations or role-playing situations produced for objects during play.

EXAMPLE:

John said, "Crash," when the dump truck and the car collided on the floor.

4. Describing one's own activity and self-guidance: Remarks, comments, and questions made by the child about his or her own activity addressed to no particular listener. This category includes descriptions of what the child is doing at the same moment or goal-directed verbal plans for actions. Also, this category includes speech in which the child talks to himself or herself as if thinking out loud and does not expect that others will attend or understand if others are present.

EXAMPLE:

Stephanie sits down at the art table and says to herself, "I want to paint something. Let's see. I need some red paint and some paper. I want to paint a house."

5. Inaudible muttering: Remarks made by the child which are too soft to be heard.
6. Other: Any comment that can not be classified into the other categories.

Results

The age groups were comparable in verbal ability and socioeconomic status. There were no gender differences in the amount of private speech emitted and the amount of time engaged in fantasy play.

A series of one-way analyses of variance were calculated to determine any significant differences between age of the child, fantasy play and private speech categories. Results indicated age differences in the amount of fantasy play that occurs during free play in preschool classrooms, $F(3,36) = 3.301$, $p < .05$. Additionally, age differences were found in the amount of total private speech utterances, $F(3,36) = 4.115$, $p < .05$, word play and repetition utterances, $F(3,36) = 9.266$, $p < .001$, and fantasy play private speech utterances, $F(3,36) = 3.525$, $p < .05$ during free play activities in the preschool classroom. The means and standard deviations are listed in Table 1.

Conclusions

The findings of this investigation did not support Vygotsky's curvilinear trend hypothesis that private speech increases from age three and peaks during the late preschool or early elementary school years. In this investigation, two-year-olds displayed the highest incidence of private speech during fantasy play episodes. These findings suggest that in fantasy play activities private speech peaks at age two when children are acquiring language and mastering their environments. The five-year-olds used the fewest private speech utterances during fantasy play which supports Vygotsky's tenets that externalized private speech begins to become internalized during the late preschool years.

Play in Vygotsky's theory is the most important educational activity that occurs in early childhood (Berk, 1994). Fantasy play in this study is an important part of the free play experience for the two-, three-, and four-year-olds. Engaging in fantasy play may give the preschool children the opportunity to understand social expectations and to become aware of the world around them. Further, preschoolers may be practicing their social skills, language skills, and communication with others by engaging in private speech during fantasy play.

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Table 1

Relationship of Age to Fantasy Play and Private Speech

	Age Group 2		3		4		5		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F(3,36)
Fantasy Play	37.4	11.6	36.4	13.1	37.9	17.1	21.7	13.8	3.301*
Total Private Speech	27.9	19.8	23.6	11.1	23.4	12.5	9.0	6.7	4.115*
Word Play/ Repetition	3.9	2.7	2.1	1.9	0.4	0.9	0.4	0.9	9.266**
Affect Expression	4.7	3.8	2.7	4.2	2.0	3.0	1.1	1.2	2.344
Fantasy Play Private Speech	12.9	8.7	14.9	9.3	13.9	7.9	5.0	5.0	3.525*
Describing one's Own activity & Self-guidance	2.6	3.6	0.7	0.7	3.3	2.9	1.0	1.6	2.650
Inaudible Muttering	2.1	0.9	2.5	3.1	3.6	3.1	1.3	1.5	1.664
Other	2.2	5.3	0.7	1.9	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.6	1.014

*p< .05
**p< .001